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Major Feature – Draft 2

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Picture this: the curtain rises over the dark stage at the Bella Rose Arts Centre. A chorus of “shhs” and muffled final thoughts fade away as a silence falls over the crowd. “It’s starting,” someone whispers. The stage is empty but the scene is set. The audience waits with anticipation before the characters enter, taking their place in the world of magic, mystery and fairy tales.

The lights flash on – the story is alive. The characters grab the audience by the hand and take them along for the journey *Into the Woods*...

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But this is just a fantasy. Right now, the HRM High School Musical’s performance of *Into the Woods* is just a shell of an idea: the sets are in pieces, and the characters have yet to come alive with costumes or makeup. They are just students tasked with turning the production of *Into the Woods* from a dream into reality. So far, it’s been more of a nightmare.

This year the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union and the provincial government went head-to-head over teachers' contracts. The work-to-rule movement that lasted from December 6 to February 21 turned schools into a battleground. Caught in the crossfire were students' extracurricular activities. Teachers could not assist with any school clubs or teams, including school musicals.

With every high school musical cancelled, it seemed that the chance for students to express their passion and love for the stage was lost. But for Ria Kapur, a Grade 12 student at Citadel High School, that just couldn't be the end.

It's the theatre, after all. The show must go on.

It started with a Facebook page. "We set up the page to see if anyone was even interested," says Kapur. Since she knew it wasn't just her Citadel High musical affected, she opened up the idea to all high school students in the HRM. The night after posting, it had already grabbed the attention of around 200 people. "That led us to begin seriously planning and producing the show," says Kapur.

Kapur decided they would perform *Into the Woods* – a modern take on classic Brothers Grimm fairy tales. The show has held auditions and released the final cast list, and named Kennedi Sijan as director. Kapur will play Little Red Riding Hood.

As the idea took off, Kapur and her fellow students faced the fact that for this performance to actually happen, it was going to take a lot of work. “The biggest challenges are definitely lack of resources,” says Kapur. The students started the project from absolutely no budget, and need to rent mics and performance and rehearsal spaces. The rights for the show alone cost around \$3000. The students have created a GoFundMe page, hoping to find the means in time to produce their vision.

Kapur insists that the members of the HRM High School Musical are completely neutral on the dispute between the NSTU and the government. But the musical they are creating would not exist if it weren't for the politics.

The term work-to-rule refers to a job action movement that is basically a form of strike. From December 6 to February 21, the NSTU's decision to enforce work-to-rule meant teachers would arrive 20 minutes before school and leave 20 minutes after. They would not perform any clerical duties or data entry tasks. And extracurriculars, including any teams or clubs, stopped.

Think about high school: what do you remember? Was it math tests or reading lists? Do you still know the quadratic formula? Most of us can't remember everything we learned in high school, but almost everyone had his or her “thing.” It could be a sport, or it could be a club. It didn't matter what this year's high school students'

“thing” was: in the HRM public schools, it was gone.

Kapur took matters into her own hands, deciding she and her friends would give students an opportunity to perform. It was something, but it certainly wasn't what she expected for her final high school musical. Like *Into the Woods* brings together characters from all over the fairytale map – Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Rapunzel and more are all tied together in one overarching story – the HRM High School Musical brings students from across the city together in one show for the first time. In the legendary words of another *High School Musical*, they were “all in this together.”

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Work-to-rule came into action on December 6, but the story began back in September 2015. It was time to negotiate teachers' contracts. In these situations, both sides initially have an asking package: the teachers' union has one, the government has another, and they work out a final agreement. This time, in August 2015, finance minister Randy Delorey brought all the heads of the labour unions together and set a financial package: they couldn't negotiate salary.

“Basically the beginning of negotiation was already dictated by the government,” says Andrea Murray, public relations coordinator for the NSTU. “That's really the key.”

On November 12, 2015, the teachers' union and government reached a tentative agreement. It was rejected. So were two more agreements, one in October 2016 and one February 9, 2017. The teachers were asking for improvements to help with their workload, as well as a salary increase. After the second rejection on October 25, 2016, 98% of NSTU members voted in favour of strike – this came in the form of work-to-rule job action.

On December 6, work to rule officially began. Extracurriculars were gone. Cancelled. Not just drama and the hopes for a high school musical, but basketball, hockey, art club, debate club, student council, yearbook – disappeared.

For many students, a high school without sports is like a musical without songs or a fairytale without the fantasy. Sports are quintessential parts of high school life: whether you're on the team, in the stands or silently rolling your eyes at how many people care whether or not a little black puck gets across the ice. It's all part of the experience.

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Picture a group of teenage boys kicking a soccer ball around a hallway of the Halifax Forum. The passes got more aggressive, and shouts heard in the hallway got louder and louder until – *crash*. A cloud of dust exploded from the ceiling panel. A chorus of

"ohhh"s and various other profanities escaped the boys before they sheepishly inspected if anything was actually broken.

"I'm going to have to take that ball away from them," Graham Owen muttered, shaking his head with the disdain of a man who has coached boys' hockey for over 40 years.

The soccer and near-vandalism was just the warm-up. Soon, the boys took centre ice. Hockey has a different stage than the theatre, but the spotlight was on the players nonetheless as they waited for the puck to drop. As it hit the ice, suddenly the game came alive with clashing sticks and the crisp sound of carving blades. The teams were Dartmouth Navy versus Bedford Armada. But in their former lives they were the Prince Andrew Panthers and the Charles P. Allen Cheetahs.

With work-to-rule in progress and high school teams suspended, Hockey Nova Scotia put together the Midget X League. Players, or groups of players, could get together and register for the league.

Owen has coached the Prince Andrew hockey team for the last three years. He said the team itself was exactly the same in this new league as it had been while representing their high school. "We're lucky everyone stuck with it," says Owen. But due to insurance issues, the team was off the ice from December 6 until January 12.

“Honestly, ever since work-to-rule happened, everything fell off,” says Dartmouth Navy team captain Dylan Evans. “We were on a good streak, everything was going well. And then it all fell apart.”

Evans has played hockey on the Prince Andrew team for three years, and he is one of five graduating students on the team. Besides its affects on hockey, school was different too.

“There was no extra support, and they can’t help people struggling,” says Evans, who is waiting on his acceptance to college for next year.

Now, instead of lacing up his skates to play for the Panthers, he and his fellow teammates were christened the Dartmouth Navy. They could not represent their high school in any way. Evan and his hockey team got a new chance to participate in the sport they love, but it was all a little different, just like Kapur and the musical. It wasn’t what Evans pictured when he started his final year of high school hockey: instead of representing the Panthers on his jersey, it’s an entirely different logo for the “Navy” – one without the school legacy they had all been representing.

The Midget X league currently has 33 teams comprising displaced high school players. According to Hockey Nova Scotia president Darren Cossar, developing this league in the midst of work-to-rule was not an easy process.

“It’s a good thing I’m bald,” says Cossar. “If I wasn’t, I would have been by the end of it.”

“We put the kids first and foremost,” says Cossar. “We just kept saying our job is to provide a place for kids to play hockey.”

As work-to-rule came to an end, it was too late for high school teams to start back up and put together a season or a championship. All the teams stayed with Hockey Nova Scotia’s Midget X. The Division 1 and a Division 2 Championship for the Midget X league took place March 30 to April 1.

Likely, that’s the end of the league, and high school hockey will be back next year. If things go wrong, Cossar says they would look into expanding regular programming.

“This is the grand finale,” says Owen of his team’s place in the tournament.

Feedback about the league has been overwhelmingly positive, according to Cossar.

“At the end of the day, everybody from the players, parents and coaches are just grateful that these kids had the opportunity to finish their season. We tried to do it in as simple a fashion as we could, and just make sure everyone was going in with the right attitude. We want to have good-spirited games.”

However, Owen insists that the experience for players was just not the same – and

that the disruption to their league matters. “They’ve been in limbo since December,” says Owen. He said he used to be very pro-teacher, but watching the way work-to-rule unfolded changed his mind. “The teachers are using students as pawns in their chess game.”

In terms of affecting scholarships for universities, Cossar acknowledges that this is not a huge issue for hockey. Top high school athletes are playing major midget level or high performance programs for hockey, and that is where scouting happens.

Basketball is another story. Basketball Nova Scotia also provided displaced high school players with an alternative option this year. They made it clear that providing a structure for a new basketball league did not mean they supported the teachers’ position, but that they simply felt the need to let students play basketball – no matter the politics of the labour dispute.

Interested teams had the chance to register as a BNS U18 team. However, due to the uncertainty of the work-to-rule situation, Basketball Nova Scotia was not able to deliver any type of regular league play. Instead, BNS decided to organize weekend exhibition tournaments for registered teams to compete in.

Just like Hockey Nova Scotia’s new league, Basketball Nova Scotia’s solution required team names and logos to have no affiliation or connection to specific high schools. If there is any connection to high school coaches – running practices, gym

time or over social media – this could lead to a Sanction by the NSSAF (Nova Scotia School Athletics Federation) for the team.

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While sports had their provincial organizations bring some sort of order back into the student athlete's year, the drama students in the HRM Musical were scrambling on their own.

"We just lost our rehearsal space," says Kapur, with just a month left before their performance. She posted on the Facebook page, desperately seeking other options, but for a while, the production plans were up in the air.

The back-and-forth nature of the work-to-rule movement left students confused, and struggling to keep up with the decisions of the government and the union.

"Honestly, it was just frustrating that we never knew when it was going to be over for good," says Grade 11 student Ryan MacDougall.

If things were different, MacDougall would have auditioned for the musical at his school, Charles P. Allen High School. Before realizing the HRM Musical would really happen, he found the Quick As A Wink Theatre Society in Windsor, N.S., which was almost an hour away from his home in Hammonds Plains. He joined their production of Grease, in

order to make sure he had performance experience to include on school applications and resumes, rather than waiting for a musical through his school.

While the extracurriculars were pushed to the sidelines, the teachers' union and government's tug-of-war continued. But after the government rejected the third agreement on February 9, they weren't interested in going back to a conciliation board process. One option, the government knew, was to legislate a contract.

On February 14, there was an emergency sitting of legislature. Liberal MLAs came together and introduced Bill 75 – imposing a contract on NSTU members.

It was the first time in Nova Scotia history that there had been a provincial job action by the teachers' union, which has been around since 1895. With Bill 75 came the first ever legislated contract in Nova Scotia.

With the imposed contract, the NSTU would be in an illegal strike position if the job action continued. Now, work-to-rule is over and the teachers' union is “completely out of the bargaining realm right now,” according to the NSTU's Andrea Murray.

When MLAs voted on February 14, protestors picket outside, blocking the vehicle of Premier Stephen McNeil and Education Minister Karen Casey. Police officers had to clear a path for the car to leave.

On February 16, members of the Nova Scotia legislature's law amendments committee sat for 12 hours to hear suggestions on how to improve Bill 75. Instead, teachers took this opportunity to tell politicians what their workdays really look like. About 100 teachers addressed the committee, often stating frustrations with their workload, particularly when dealing with students with learning challenges that require individual programs. Teachers told the committee that Bill 75 would not improve their working conditions.

McNeil defended Bill 75 as necessary, while NSTU president Liette Doucet pledged that it was unfair and eroded the bargaining process.

On February 17 the NSTU held its first ever walkout – making history, once again.

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“Hey hey, ho ho, Bill 75 has got to go!

Hey hey, ho ho, Bill 75 has got to go!”

During the one-day strike, protesters chanted outside Nova Scotia legislature loud enough for all to hear inside the building. Thousands of teachers rallied against the provincial government, ringing cowbells, honking horns, and even singing the chorus of Twisted Sister's “We're Not Gonna Take It.” That was basically the theme

of the day. The teachers were fighting for change, and insisted they were not going back to how things were before.

Teachers bussed from across the province to march in Halifax, armed with signs supporting the union with phrases like “Negotiate don’t Dictate” and “Let Teachers Teach”. One creative poster featured a drawing of Miss Frizzle, the beloved teacher from the television show *Magic School Bus*. The caption: “The Search for McNeil’s Soul: “To the bus!””

Despite the bitter cold, some protesters began their stand outside the legislature at 7 p.m. the night before. The streets were packed throughout the following day, and it wasn’t just teachers. Many students joined the protest, along with their parents. Some students held homemade signs stating, “I support my teachers.”

Shouting through a megaphone, one protester began to chant and those around quickly caught on. Soon protesters all joined together, chanting “Public service under attack – what do we do? Stand up, fight back!”

During the strike, the fight against Bill 75 took place across the province. In Cape Breton, around 75 teachers began picketing at 8 a.m. outside the constituency office of Transportation Minister Geoff MacLellan, MLA for Glace Bay.

But with all the noise, the teachers’ message did not change the minds of the MLAs

inside the buildings. Despite proposals for amendments from the union, the government confirmed on the 17th that none would be accepted.

The new legislated contract contains a three per cent salary increase and features elements that the previous agreements of the NSTU members rejected. The bill also establishes a council to improve classroom conditions and a commitment of \$20 million over two years to work on this.

Because work-to-rule was a union-wide decision, individual teachers are not allowed to comment on the situation. HRSB teachers are not supposed to talk to the media. Citadel High administrative assistant Jane Ferrell said chances are slim for finding a teacher willing to open up – even now that work-to-rule is over.

“Even if it’s not published, there’s the worry that something will get out,” said Ferrell. “It’ll be heard that ‘this teacher said that,’ and suddenly it’s on the 6 o’clock news.”

Whether they passionately agree, or silently harbor reservations, HRSB teachers are stuck on the side of the NSTU and the decision for work-to-rule.

But that’s only public school teachers. Picture Halifax’s own version of Dalton Academy versus William McKinley High in *Glee*. Sacred Heart School of Halifax

stands just a few blocks away from Citadel, but is only a bystander to this school year's struggles.

While Kapur and the members of *Into the Woods* struggle for rehearsal space, funding and production assistance, Sacred Heart's production of *Much Ado about Nothing* is on track for its upcoming performance.

"It's a wonderful co-curricular activity," says headmistress Anne Wachter. She stresses their programs are co-curriculars, as they "make the anticipated, expected academic program come alive in ways that really engage students and make them love learning about it."

Along with performing *Much Ado about Nothing*, Sacred Heart students have the opportunity this spring for an outing to Neptune Theatre. According to Wachter, the focus is exposing students to live theatre and bringing a lifelong appreciation for the arts.

"They are motivated," says Wachter of the students involved in Sacred Heart's musical. "It's also one of the ways they have a relationship with their teachers."

Wachter insists that a huge predictor of a student's academic success is having strong relationships with their teachers. "Often through extracurricular experiences students see another side of their teachers, and see how deeply their teachers love

them,” says Wachter.

But Sacred Heart was not unaffected by work-to-rule. As an independent school – one of three Canadian accredited independent schools in Halifax – Sacred Heart has the ability to compete in a couple different arenas for sports. Usually, the Sacred Heart Sharks are part of the Nova Scotia School Athletics Federation, but their opportunity to face off against public school teams was halted due to work-to-rule.

“That suffered this year,” says Wachter, “but because we wear two hats, if you will, we can still participate. We forged on, in a smaller field of teams, but continued to offer athletics.”

This year was different, but competing against other independent schools allowed Sacred Heart student athletes a chance to play.

Wachter also praises the affect of school teams and clubs on their many international students. “Those kids really would have suffered with work-to-rule,” says Wachter. “They really count on co-curricular stuff to learn about Canada and the language, beyond academics.”

“There were some drawbacks and some silver linings for us,” says Wachter. “It made people think about alternatives, and I think that’s a good thing. With the dissatisfaction with work-to-rule and the unrest in the public system, people want

to see what options they have. That's not a bad thing."

As Halifax public high schools faced a semester of turmoil, Sacred Heart – with its university prep course and guidance, ski trips, and fully developed Shakespeare performance – almost looks like public schools' shining older sibling, proudly showing off their gold star in student experience. But with tuition for grades 7 to 12 students adding up to over \$16,000 per year, these bragging rights and escaping the drama over teachers' contracts, has a major cost.

Wachter notes that Sacred Heart was thrilled to have more than the usual number of student teachers this year. One of work-to-rule's more far-reaching effects extended to universities and those studying a Bachelor of Education: while Sacred Heart took in many student teachers, losing the opportunity for work placements in public schools left many B.Ed. students in the lurch for this degree requirement.

"It was a stressful time while it was going," says Garnet Patterson, B.Ed. program manager at St. Francis Xavier University. "The students didn't know what was going to happen."

If work-to-rule continued, nearly 300 St. FX students would not be able to graduate on time. Five universities – Acadia, Cape Breton University, Mount Saint Vincent, St. Francis Xavier, and Sainte-Anne – said the union violated the Education Act by refusing to supervise student teachers as part of its job action.

In order to stand up for education students, these universities launched a request for an injunction to eliminate that portion of work-to-rule. This suit against the union didn't actually happen: once the province passed legislation imposing the contract that overrode the injunction request.

St. FX B.Ed. students lost a couple of weeks of their fall practicum – other than that, they were back to class. However, student teachers in Halifax, mainly at Mount St. Vincent, as well as those in the Annapolis Valley at Acadia, lost quite a bit of time.

Though the imposed contract stopped work-to-rule, winter sports were still cancelled and the HRM musical is still on its own. Many extracurriculars are back on, but it's up to each teacher's individual professional judgment whether or not they want to continue with this extra work.

"We do know that during the work-to-rule period, there was a lot of feedback about teachers able to get some more work-life balance," says the NSTU's Murray. "(During work-to-rule) the focus was ensuring teachers have time to focus primarily on teaching."

"It also helped demonstrate all the above and beyond stuff teachers really do," says Murray.

Without teachers to help them, students took on a role reversal. In the wake of the dispute, a group of students in Halifax took to Facebook, like Kapur, and created a page. “Students for Teachers” has more than 2,400 members. A similar page exists for parents.

“It was definitely an organic process,” Andrea Murray says of the groups. “They formed on their own. The parent group was very concerned, because a lot of them have children with special needs. They understood why the teachers were doing this – they wanted a better education for their children.”

In terms of improving education for the province, according to a press release from Minister of Education Karen Casey, the council built due to Bill 75 will “take real action to reduce the demands on teachers’ time that limit their ability to support student learning.” It will still be up to individual teachers to determine if they are involved in voluntary extracurricular activities.

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Grade 12 is a busy year for most students, but Kapur’s year has been crazy. With lost rehearsal space and huge costs looming over the musical’s production, getting the show up and running has been a whirlwind. But everyone has his or her part; the date is set. It has to happen, right? The students are focused, and they want it. The performance date is May 13 – less than one month away.

The students of *Into the Woods* are salvaging a school year of confusion and unrest; they lost teacher support, but found encouragement among their peers and community.

“The cast and creative team is absolutely amazing to work with,” says Kapur. “They have given everything they have to get this project off the ground.”

The roller coaster ride of the work-to-rule movement has come to a stop, but the tension of the teachers’ union war still lingers. The protests were loud and angry: teachers, students and parents all wanted change. The government imposed Bill 75 and the council will determine how Nova Scotia schools can become better.

In the meantime, Kapur’s school year will still end with a musical. The final scene is hard to picture: a fuzzy image of final bows and roaring applause is just a distant daydream. But we all know how fairytales are supposed to end. The HRM High School Musical cast will make sure their story has a happily ever after.